

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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INTERIOR, AGRICULTURE JOIN FORCES TO SAVE CALIFORNIA'S RARE CONDOR

In a new move aimed at saving the California condor, Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel today ordered a halt on all further oil and gas leasing in the Sespe Condor Sanctuary.

The California sanctuary, part of the Los Padres National Forest, is administered by the Agriculture Department. It is the only known remaining nesting area for the California condor, a rare creature listed high on Interior's Endangered Species List.

Secretary Hickel directed the Bureau of Land Management to declare an indefinite moratorium on pending leases and any future lease applications in the sanctuary until wildlife experts from Interior and the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service can complete research on increasing the condor population.

In a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Clifford M. Hardin, Secretary Hickel said further oil and gas leasing in the 53,000 acre sanctuary would be "inappropriate." He called the moratorium "an opportunity for our two departments to cooperate closely on preserving a rare and endangered species; an opportunity which should not be missed."

The sanctuary contains two producing oil wells. Some 28 applications are pending to lease additional land in and around the sanctuary for oil and gas production. An exception allowing the leasing was made in the 1951 withdrawal order which created the Sespe sanctuary. While the land is administered by the Forest Service, mineral leasing is supervised by the BLM.

Wildlife officials in Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife say the condor's numbers are even lower than in 1951 when efforts to save it from extinction resulted in establishment of the California sanctuary.

The decrease in the number of condors is attributed to poor reproduction, sometimes caused by nearby loud noise such as blasting. This can cause the birds to leave their nests during critical incubation periods.

With a wing span that sometimes reaches nine feet, the California condor is America's largest bird in flight.

Its numbers now have dwindled to "between 60 and 80," and the bird's future is very much in doubt, wildlife experts say. Only 11 attempts have been made to nest in the last three years, and only five of these have been successful.

Federal authorities recently instituted more stringent regulations on blasting at petroleum drilling sites near condor nesting areas. However, to date this measure has not brought any noticeable reduction in the bird's decline.

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